

Senate Democrats seek peace with GOP

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Two Democratic leaders of the state Senate, in a bid to get senators to work together better this year, vowed Thursday to block the Senate from passing any bill to redraw legislative or congressional districts.

Lt. Gov. Jim Folsom Jr. and Sen. Hinton Mitchem, D-Union Grove, said a legislative redistricting bill likely would be disruptive and trigger delaying tactics by lawmakers opposed to having their districts changed.

They said the Senate had bigger things to worry about, such as passing state budgets that may have less money to spend next year. The Legislature's regular session starts Feb. 5.

Mitchem said some Republican senators have worried that Democrats, who control the state Senate and House of Representatives, would try to make it harder for Republicans to win re-election in 2010 by redrawing district boundaries, perhaps by putting their homes into other senators' districts.

"With this action, we're extending the olive branch of cooperation to the Senate minority, and we call upon the Republicans in the Alabama Senate to commit to abandon their shutdown tactics and to unite with us and do the people's business," said Mitchem, the top-ranking state senator.

Folsom, who presides over debate in the Senate, said, "Redistricting will not be an issue that is allowed to stand in the way of the Senate functioning in a productive manner." He and Mitchem made their announcement at a press conference in Birmingham.

In last year's legislative session, Republicans and a few Democrats allied with them delayed passage of many bills over many days in the Senate, in part to protest what they said were unfair operating rules imposed on them by the Senate majority.

Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, said the pledge taken by Folsom and Mitchem was "a step in the right direction."

"If they had introduced redistricting, it would have bogged down the Senate. Since they are not going to come with it, it's a good sign. It could be a productive session," said Waggoner, the Senate minority leader.

With the expected switch of former Democrat Sen. Jimmy Holley of Elba to the Republican Party, Democrats hold a 22-13 advantage over Republicans in the Senate. Democrats hold a 61-43 advantage in the House, with one vacancy.

Under Senate rules for most proposed laws, opponents who try to talk a bill to death can be stopped if 21 or more senators vote to invoke cloture, which stops delaying tactics and forces a vote on the bill. Republicans, with help from a few Democrats last year, often were able to maintain delaying tactics because Democrats couldn't round up 21 votes to stop them.

But the Democratic majority last year wrote the Senate rules so that just 18 senators could invoke cloture to stop delaying tactics on state budgets and on bills to redraw congressional or legislative districts. So Republicans had been on edge for a while, and not just about whether Democrats would target legislative seats.

Late last year, some House Republicans vowed to use delaying tactics to paralyze the House this spring if Democrats tried to redraw the 2nd Congressional District to make it more Democratic. The district incumbent, U.S. Rep. Terry Everett, R-Rehobeth, said in September that he would not seek re-election this year.

But Speaker Seth Hammett, D-Andalusia, the House leader, in November said he would oppose redrawing congressional districts this spring because it would divide the House and waste time. The speaker has great power to kill bills he doesn't like.

Folsom and Mitchem on Thursday said they also would use their power to block passage in the Senate of any congressional redistricting bill, but said they believed Republican state senators had been more worried about Democrats trying to knock off a few of them by redrawing their districts.

A bill must pass both the House and Senate to become law.